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SUBJECT: BABY STEPS: U.S. SPEAKER BLONG XIONG OPENS SOME DOORS IN
LAOS

¶1. SUMMARY. Blong Xiong, President of the Fresno City Council, participated in a U.S. Speaker program in Laos from November 17-21 that Post had planned to focus on local governance and constituent services in the United States for roundtables of smaller audiences from academic and administrative organizations. Instead, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs only reluctantly approved a short program that included, at MFA's insistence, the more sensitive issue of Hmong-American relations. From the Embassy's perspective, the program still ended up a notable success, with Party organizations prominently represented in the audience at Mr. Xiong's primary lecture and two excellent meetings at MFA. While not all that we had wished, the program brought one of the most senior Hmong-American elected officials to Laos on an official visit - a first worth noting. END SUMMARY.

¶2. Mr. Blong Xiong, whose mother is ethnic Lao and whose father is ethnic Hmong, is one of the few elected officials in the United States with a Hmong background. He was born in Laos in 1969 and came to the U.S. as a refugee with his family at the age of five. He holds a Master of Business Administration and has had several years of experience in both the public and private sector. Elected to the Fresno city council in 2007, Xiong became the President earlier this year. His program in Laos focused on local government and administration in the U.S. and what it is like to be Lao-Hmong in America.

HOT POTATO, HOT POTATO

¶3. Although positive when the program was first proposed informally in the spring, the Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) took an unusually long time to grant formal approval. After first assuring us that MFA didn't see any potential problems, the MFA Europe and Americas Department tossed the program to another division within the MFA, snatched it back, and briefly threatened to cancel the program entirely ("not enough time") one week before the start date - and after Mr. Xiong had already arrived in Laos. The Director General of the Europe and Americas Department was convinced of the program's potential benefits only after direct intervention by Ambassador Huso.

¶4. Post's initial request kept the proposed lecture topics as anodyne as possible, including "Local Governance Models in California" and "City Planning and Budgeting," but MFA officials requested what they considered a more neutral (or perhaps more interesting?) topic: the role of overseas Lao in strengthening bilateral relationships. (Note: Post agreed to ask that Xiong cover both, although we were surprised to hear that the MFA thought the role of overseas Hmong was not as politically sensitive as the Fresno city budget.) In addition, since formal approval came late and during the largest religious and cultural holiday in Laos, the MFA informed Post that "all the requested parties" would join one large lecture hosted by the Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA), rather than holding a series of smaller roundtables as Post had

proposed. Furthermore, although MFA officials stated that they very much wanted Xiong to meet with the authorities for the City of Vientiane to begin work on exchanges and mutual cooperation, the new mayor and his staff were "fully occupied" on the dates in question. (Note: The newly-appointed Mayor formally took office the week of Xiong's arrival, and most likely was in fact otherwise occupied.) Finally, Post received a call from MFA at 4:30 pm the day before the lecture, informing us that journalists would not be invited, disappointing our hopes for what is traditionally robust press coverage of Embassy PDS events hosted at IFA.

THE WEEK IN REVIEW

IFA Lecture

15. The lecture at IFA included a packed house of over 80 government officials and Lao People's Revolutionary Party structure representatives, including from offices that were not on our original proposal, such as the Ministry of National Defense (MND), Lao Federation of Trade Unions, Lao Front for National Reconstruction, and Lao Women's Union. Officials from MFA and MND requested copies of the powerpoint presentation, which focused exclusively on the structure, roles, and responsibilities of the Fresno City Council, while most questions came from the Party representatives. The lecture itself created no controversy and generated no pointed questions, although the participants were interested in hearing about Xiong's attempt to balance his city responsibilities with pressures from his ethnic community.

Presentations to Student Groups

16. Xiong also spoke to student groups during his visit. He lectured at the American Corner to a class of university students from the Lao American College on city government and local responsibilities. The students were particularly interested in local elections and the decisions Xiong had to make as an official. Xiong toured the facilities at the Lao American College and spoke to the director, Virginia van Ostrand, about opportunities for the U.S. Lao-Hmong community to support scholarships for students in Laos. Xiong later spoke to approximately 50 secondary school students at Eastern Star Bilingual School on the same topic of local governance. Questions from this group were more targeted to national issues, including what policy changes Xiong expects to see once President-elect Obama takes office. (Note: This is the first time Eastern Star has hosted a U.S. speaker or Embassy event. The school is small but students are generally from wealthy and influential families.)

Meeting with MFA Europe and Americas

17. Finally, Xiong had two important and extremely positive meetings at MFA, one with the Director General of Europe and Americas, Ambassador Khouanta Phalivong, and the second with Director for Overseas Lao, Mr. Lyying Sayaxang, who is himself ethnic Hmong. Khouanta went out of his way to thank Xiong for his participation and spent a good 10 minutes inviting Xiong back to Laos for a longer and more robust program. He said the Embassy could submit our original proposal for "complete approval" and the MFA would be pleased to facilitate a series of events with Vientiane Municipality. Furthermore, Khouanta noted that he had requested information about Xiong from the Lao Embassy in Washington, and had been pleased to learn that Xiong is already a good contact of the Lao Ambassador there. Khouanta told Xiong that the Government of Laos would be happy to act as host for the next official visit, and Xiong could work either through the U.S. Embassy here or the Lao Embassy there. He also made a point of asking Xiong for his "honest perspective" about conditions in Laos, to which Xiong replied that he has seen only positive change during this visit in comparison with his previous visits as a tourist.

Meeting with MFA Overseas Lao

17. Xiong's meeting with Overseas Lao Director Lyying included all of the welcoming remarks and hopes for another trip that DG Khouanta had delivered earlier, in addition to a list of "messages" Lyying

asked Xiong to take back to his community. Lyying made a point of stating (and restating) that this was the first visit to Laos by a Hmong American in an official capacity. He said that his office is working to get approval for native Lao with foreign passports to:

- receive visas for 90 days, rather than the usual 30;
- expedite the approval for cultural performers entering and leaving the country;
- "make it easier" for families and volunteers to come to Laos to help as "experts" in different areas;
- allow Lao to return family members for burial here; and
- permit overseas Lao to return and retire in Laos.

18. Director Lyying said that the GOL had learned a lesson from others, including Vietnam, and asked Xiong to "tell the people that the Government of Laos will welcome all overseas Lao to come back home." He then noted that requests would be approved case by case, as there were some "individuals" who may not receive approval. The Director also stressed that every dollar sent to Laos from the United States was helpful, and that the government would not interfere with money sent to family member. He cautioned, however, that overseas Lao must obey local rules and regulations when they want to return to set up NGOs or other organized assistance mechanisms in Laos.

19. Language Note: Lyying began the meeting with an apology for speaking in Lao, but noted that since this was an official meeting, the two needed to use the official language of Laos. Furthermore, he noted the U.S. Embassy escorts didn't speak Hmong, and his own notetaker was ethnic Khmu. Lyying then immediately switched into Hmong, for what Xiong says was a quick conversation about Lyying's recent trip to Minnesota.

COMMENT

110. Despite the last-minute negotiations to get a rump program off the ground, Post believes we achieved some notable success with Xiong's visit. The Embassy was disappointed at the delays and obfuscation of the MFA during the approvals process for this program, given what we thought were the obvious advantages of building relations with an increasingly important overseas Lao community and the relatively tame subject matter of U.S. local government structures. The Public Diplomacy Section had hosted

speakers earlier in the year, without difficulties, on matters we thought were more sensitive, including a two-week program on international human rights norms and comparative government with two Georgetown University professors and a rule of law program led by a U.S. federal judge. We were also surprised that the MFA insisted on adding overseas Lao relations to the program, and told us this topic was "more neutral" than city planning and budgeting.

111. Still, while our usual set of academics was not included, Party and MND participation meant that we reached some traditionally less-accessible audiences, and ones that may have the least amount of accurate information about the United States. Despite the lack of local press coverage, Post believes the large lecture format turned out to be a great success. Students at both schools were also clearly delighted to have an ethnic Asian speak in perfect American English, and they were even more engaged on the topics than many of the officials in the IFA lecture.

112. The meetings with the MFA were so warm and almost apologetic that we believe the invitation for this particular Hmong-American to return was quite sincere, and that the GOL would permit him to speak to a wider range of offices next time. Finally, the program did help avoid what could have been a public relations setback for relations between the Lao government and the overseas Hmong community in Fresno: media interest in Xiong's visit in California had already generated TV and print press stories even prior to his arrival, and Xiong has interviews with local TV scheduled for the week after his return home.